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AUTHOR Willie, Sarah
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of class and gender in the experience of African American college students at Howard University (Washington, D.C.) and Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois). The study used interviews with 25 Black students, all but one of whom identified themselves as African American. Preliminary analysis of the interviews with women in the study found that women who had no difficulty with their college and post-college experience tended to be those who had been brought up by single parents suggesting that financial considerations pressured them to complete school and move into stable employment quickly. The male participants fell into two categories, those who entered unsure of their majors or careers but finished on time and moved directly to work or graduate study and those who entered knowing their major who also pursued graduate degrees or jobs related to their major after finishing college on time. Overall the data suggest that options and college and post-college experience were constrained by gender expectations and financial resources. Anecdotal evidence also indicated that gender expectations complicated the lives of some participants. (JB)

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African American Experiences in College: Issues of Class and Gender in Different Institutional Contexts

Sarah Willie
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Colby College
Waterville, Maine

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Attention reader: This paper is more a memorandum than a coherent argument. Some of what I have put forth, though based on the data, is anecdotal. I am at an elementary stage in my analysis of this data, and I ask for your comments and ideas as I try to work through the ideas in this piece.

Introduction

While enrollments at most American colleges have been down in recent years because of the dip in the post-baby boom birth rate, applications and enrollments at historically black colleges have bucked the overall trend and risen.

> Admissions officials say the increase in class size has been accompanied by an improvement in applicants' grades and test scores....[I]n the past five years, the number of blacks attending black institutions has increased 10% ...according to the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education. And that increase has come...as the percentage of black 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in colleges has declined. Educators attribute the renaissance at black institutions in part to racial conflicts in many cities and on many predominantly white campuses....But other factors in the trend include high-profile alumni; awareness created by the television show 'A Different World,' ...low tuition; and a renewed desire among many blacks to study in an environment that is more sensitive to their history, culture and needs (*The Wall Street Journal,* July 9, 1990).

By interviewing post-Civil Rights Era black college alumni, I had hoped to find answers to questions with which I had been left after my own college experiences at both a predominantly white college and an historically black one. This paper extrapolates from a sample of my dissertation project that involved interviewing more than sixty African

Americans who were undergraduate students[1] for at least two years at either Howard or Northwestern Universities[2] between 1970 and 1990. In it, I argue that the college and post-college experiences of students strongly suggest that class and gender come together to shape those experiences in distinct ways.

Much of the literature on African American college students has examined their experiences in relation to or in comparison with European American students. By focussing exclusively on black student, I hope to draw out more subtle

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[1]This paper is based on those 25 interviews that have been transcribed. All but one of my respondents graduated. Every one in the sample identified as an African-American except for one West Indian. A few people in my sample began college before 1970; all graduated by 1990. The alumni with whom I spoke all lived in the Chicago area at the time of the study.

[2]Though they are in different sections of the country, Howard and Northwestern share many similarities. Both are mid-sized co-educational private institutions. Both were founded in the middle of last century. Howard is largely funded by the United States government, and, has, therefore, been able to keep its tuition to just less than half of Northwestern. Still, eighty percent of Howard students receive some financial aid compared to sixty percent of Northwestern students (Peterson, 1989). Howard spreads itself over 240 acres of this nation's capital city, while Northwestern is situated over 230 acres of expensive Lake Michigan beach front property in Evanston, Illinois. Of Howard's 9000 undergraduates, thirty-nine percent are male and sixty-one percent are female. Northwestern's undergraduate student body of 7300 is half men and half women (U.S.News and World Report, "America's Best Colleges," September 1991). While Northwestern is more selective in its admissions policies, both schools aspire to heights of prestige. Howard is often described by its alumni and others as "the Mecca for black thought in this country" (Beckham 1984) and the Black Harvard (Birnbach,1984: 72), while Northwestern describes itself as "ranked Number 2 after Harvard in alumni among officers of the Fortune 500 and ... Number 7 in holders of B.A. degrees who are listed in Who's Who" (Birnbach, 1984: 100). Both schools work to de-emphasize the country club and party-school reputations that have occasionally accompanied their descriptions by students and alumni. Both schools encourage campus Greek-letter organizations -- though fraternity participation is much higher at Northwestern -- and there was a time in the past when photographs were requested of all candidates as part of their admission materials.

distinctions among blacks, especially between men and women. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham suggests in her recent article "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race,"

> in societies where racial demarcation is endemic to their sociocultural fabric and heritage -- to their laws and economy, to their institutionalized structures and discourses, and to their epistemologies and everyday customs -- *gender identity is inextricably linked to and even determined by racial identity* (in *Signs*, Winter 1992: 254, emphasis added).

When race and gender are treated arbitrarily as separate and independent variables, we risk misinterpreting history.

Class and Gender in the Length of the College Experience

One of my informal hypotheses had been that students who had attended a predominantly black college, in this case Howard, would have been more focussed and therefore would have finished school ahead of those who had attended a predominantly white school, in this case Northwestern. This informal hypothesis was based on the knowledge that historically black colleges tend to provide a more supportive learning environment for most black students (Fleming, Gurin and Epps, Willie and Edmonds). I was surpised, then, when the dilemmas that students faced during and after college did not fall along institutional lines.

Preliminary analysis reveals three patterns among my interviews with women. Because of the confusion or difficulties they faced during college, one group of women

in my sample were unable to finish college on schedule. A second group finished on time but had difficulty choosing or pursuing a career immediately after college. But the third group knew their major when they entered college and did not appear at all confused upon leaving college. The most startling characteristic that differentiates the first two categories of women from those who did not note confusion, loneliness, ambiguity and depression in their college stories is economic security. The women who reported no difficulties in their college or work careers were brought up by single parents. It seems reasonable to suspect that financial considerations pressured them to complete school and move into stable employment as quickly as possible.

Thus far in my analysis, one exception to these categories exists in the story of a young woman who fits into both the first and the third groups. After her sophomore year at a small, predominantly white, liberal arts college, she left to marry. It would seem that this would qualify her for an entry into the first category. And, indeed, pregnancy drove her to fulfill supremely traditional gender expectations in both her decision to leave school[3] and to marry. She entered Howard two years later, after her marriage had ended and it was clear to her that she was not going to be able to support her family without an

[3]Of course, it is quite possible that in the early 1970s the college she attended, might have forbidden either a pregnant and/or an unwed pregnant woman to continue her studies.

undergraduate degree. If we were to look only at her Howard experience, she exemplifies category three: she was focussed and motivated, earning only A's, qualifying for financial scholarship, and finally putting herself on welfare to suppport herself while finishing college. Being a single parent, then, provided the same impetus for this particular woman as being raised by a single parent provided for the other women in the third category.

Unlike their female counterparts, the men appeared to fall into only two categories. They either were unsure about their majors or careers but still finished college on schedule and moved directly into a graduate program or career, or they entered college knowing what they wanted to major in and pursued graduate degrees or jobs related to that major immediately after finishing college on time. For the men, there appeared to be no relationship between economic security and career directedness. Some of these men faced financial pressures similar to those of their female counterparts. Others, their stories suggest, confronted the traditional gender expectations that pressed them to finish school and find a job even when they might have afforded a period of indecision.

The one man in my sample who confided that he had fathered a child during his undergraduate years argued that this placed further responsibility upon him to find more work as well as to keep his studies up.

Especially when the college experience comes at the close of adolescence, it is a time when confusion and ambiguity are apparent among most students, regardless of ethnic background. How African-American students handled the dilemmas and choices they faced appears to be related to the options they felt were open to them. My data suggest that these options are constrained by both gendered expectations and financial resources.

The Costs of Traditional Gender Expectations

Below, I share anecdotal evidence that traditional gender expectations complicated the lives of some of my respondents.

Howard alumnae, Barbara, talks about the consequences of pursuing non-traditional program of studies and how vulnerable such a choice left the other aspects of her choice:

> I didn't [make a big deal about dressing] and you could get away with that moreso in engineering... All the while I was in school I would always wear like eyeliner and lipstick and girls in engineering would make some little comments about how I would wear eyeliner and lipstick all the time, like, "I don't have time for that!" And since I didn't have the grades, they would... make little snide comments like, "Too much time on your physical and not enough on your grades." ...And then outside engineering, people would come and be like, "These girls do not take care of themselves. What is their problem?!" [I say, Sounds like you couldn't win?] Yeah, and I usually, you know, I didn't change myself. I wasn't going to. I probably went more in the opposite direction [of what anybody said] because I felt like there was pressure to be one way or the other (Barbara, fieldnotes).

She endured offense from both men and women. Her experience, however, is not peculiar to Howard. The women who pursued college careers in the natural or technological sciences echoed her confusion and loneliness. And sadly, as Barbara reports, it is largely other women in the sciences who harass her.

After having told me that she had observed men behaving badly toward women and having emphasized that the problem was not peculiar to Howard, Barbara nonetheless responded to my question of why she thought her social life was not what she would have hoped with this answer:

> I think it's me. I don't think, ah, I think it's me. I think, cause, yes, it's me. Cause I'm so, I'm very hard on myself, you know. I don't know if you've noticed that but I'm very hard on myself and that doesn't just stay with me, it stays with other people, too... I'm hard on them. I expect a lot from them and I'm very, see, I don't know how to say this without sounding crazy, but I don't think I'm a very nice person to be around. You know, because I'm just me and I'll say what's on my mind but sometimes those things aren't very sensitive. And I won't hesitate to say "That's stupid!" or something. Because I'm opinionated or I really don't know what it is.... I just expected more [in the romance department] and it just didn't happen. It didn't happen at Howard. I don't know what I did wrong there.... I don't know maybe if I'd done more, maybe that would have been enough, but I don't think that's anything with them. I think it's something with me (Barbara, fieldnotes).

Barbara's story is unfortunately not unique. Saying what's on one's mind -- voicing one's opinion -- takes a toll on both the heterosexual desirability of women as well as challenging the notion of place, even (and sometimes moreso) as women pursue non-traditional majors or occupy non-

traditional careers. Psychologist Jacqueline Fleming found in her recent and exhaustive study of blacks in college, that black women who spoke out continuously throughout college suffered socially at both black and white colleges but even moreso at historically black colleges. Suffering from depression, with a failing grade point average, Barbara withdrew from Howard, defeated, after six years without a degree.

The following story is more upbeat in its ending and that is not unrelated to, I believe, the gender of its protagonist. In this situation, traditional gender expectations play a tremendous role in actually creating the situation. Luke was in Northwestern's Class of 72. He remembers the adrenelin and cohesiveness of the late sixties and early seventies:

> Everybody was very close. I mean, you going down the street and someone was across the street that you didn't know, you speak to them. You probably go across the street and talk to them. Introduce yourself and talk. Very close type thing.....Your blackness was more important than anything else. That was the key kind of thing: Black consciousness (interview notes, Luke).

Luke requested I turn off the tape recorder after I asked him if he was involved in a racially motivated incident in which several students were suspended. He described an incident in which *several black male students sought vengeance on behalf of a black female student who had been accosted by a white male student* in the cafeteria. Clearly, appropriate gender responsibility is also part of this story. Luke explained

that the cafeteria incident was one in a long line of incidents in which Black students had been hit with water balloons walking passed white fraternities, in which fights had erupted during basketball games, and in which there was "just a lot of racial unrest on campus." This, Luke reminded me, was also the year of the massacre at Kent State. Luke was one of several students who broke into the offending white student's fraternity house, destroyed fraternity property and engaged in a racially-motivated fight. Although they were not caught in the act, the president of the University was given a list of Black students' names who were thought to have participated. Everyone on the list faced suspension unless those who confessed came forward to assume responsibility.

The students talked about who would suffer the most by an interruption in their program of studies and whose parents could financially afford to have them back living at home for one or two academic quarters. As a student in the highly structured engineering program and one of seven children, Luke could less afford the suspension than some of his liberal arts comrades. The group decided he should not step forward. His voice shook and he fought back tears as he recounted the experience.

This story of female suffering being compensated for with male violent retaliation which is in turn met with suffering and honor is a story that develops along supremely traditional gender expectations. Luke went on to earn his

MBA. I should note that Luke was a hero among many of his younger black classmates. One other alumni, younger than Luke, offered unsolicited description of him as a god.

To Repeat or Not to Repeat

Related to these stories, I believe, are the decisions of alumni regarding whether and where they would repeat their college experience. In general, all Howard students would choose to go to Howard again while Northwestern students were mixed. Lydia's response was among the most enthusiastic:

> I was raised in the ghetto in New Jersey. And I think you'll always hear "Niggers can't do this and niggers can't do that," and "Niggers ain't this and niggers ain't that." Looking up there and [seeing them] standing around on the corner. And it was just so uplifting to go to a black institution that has been there for over 100 years. And it's still standing and it's operating day to day and you're turning out the creme de la creme of black society. So we must be doing something right... [I]t's very positive and uplifting. And that was part of the excitement in being there. And it was good to be a part of that....I was excited to be a part of history, because I felt connected to everybody that had been through there. And you can take me to Howard right now and take me up on the yard and I will fall out crying. Because I can just feel them all just moving through me. It's wonderful (fieldnotes, Lydia).

Even Barbara, the one Howard drop-out in my sample, whose experience there was unsuccessful, would go to Howard again. Reflecting, she wishes to change herself, but not the school, if she had a second chance.

While Luke had a successful experience at Northwestern, he is not sure that he would go there again. While he might consider an historically black college for "the "comraderie"

and "traditions," if he were making the decision today, he would just as seriously consider an Ivy League:

> Maybe I would go East. Maybe I would go to a Harvard. I was purposely avoiding something like a Harvard because of the reputation and all that, it's like, you're so stuck-up and stuff and I'm not into that. But now, I'm certainly a lot more oriented toward money and like well, hey, if that's where you have to go to meet people and rub shoulders for contacts, I would do it (fieldnotes, Luke).

And finally, I'd like to share another atypical response from Gary who went to Northwestern, had a successful experience and would go there again. His response about Northwestern is just as enthusiastic as Lydia's is about Howard.

> I love Northwestern University. I loved my experience here, the good and the bad parts. I wouldn't change it because of what I am now. I have no regrets...All my friends are Northwestern alumni. They're my extended family. I talk to an alumni of Northwestern University almost every day (Gary, interview notes).

While these two men are representative only in so far as one would choose to attend if he had it to do over again and the other would not, they tell us something important in their choices. One would repeat it, while the other would go in search of an even more prestigious place. If anyone was going to gain so much from the predominantly white coeducational college experience, it is more likely to be men. While all but one woman were less enthusiastic about either kind of college experience than all of the men who went to Howard, if any one woman was going to be gungo-ho

about college, it should not surprise us that it was a woman who went to Howard where at least one aspect of her self would garner validation. This supports Jacqueline Fleming's argument in *Black Students in College* (1984) that coeducational black colleges appear to do for black men what coeducational white colleges to for white men. Women still have yet to be fully embrassed by the coeducational setting.

Conclusion

Clearly, race, resources, and gender come together in important to shape the experiences of students. By focussing exclusively on black students, I hope to have drawn out more subtle distinctions among them, especially between men and women.